LIS 550: Assignment 2
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I will approach this assignment as an advisor to the mayor of Lexington, Kentucky (USA). My first task is to define the digital divides as they apply to Lexington. Lexington is a predominantly middle-class city in terms of income and culture; it is home to the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University (the largest and oldest universities in the state), as well as several smaller colleges. Some of its largest employers include high-tech companies Lexmark, Hewlett-Packard, and Amazon, as well as engineering-intensive companies such as Toyota, Trane, and Square D. Essentially, Lexington's populace holds a high level of technical knowledge, and is generally affluent. However, this knowledge does not necessarily result in a high level of ICT use; many people seem not to understand how ICT can be useful and relevant to their lives, and may lack skills as well as context, especially in the cases of elderly and working-class citizens. Because so many people are reasonably well off, the concerns of the poor (working and non-working) and working class can be invisible to large numbers of middle-class people who see their own lives as typical.

I chose to address Lexington's digital divides because they are not as simple as providing access to ICT equipment and connections, as a rule. In Lexington's case, bridging the digital divides is a matter of access for some people, but in many more cases it has to do with what Comunello terms "motivational access," and the process of bringing dropouts, intermittent users, and evaders into the community of active ICT users, providing them with the skills and context to acquire the benefits that ICT can bring.

The centerpiece of my proposal is a digital literacy center that will provide a variety of services for the community. Lexington is currently experiencing a revitalization of its downtown district after a period of flight to the suburbs over the past several decades that left much of the central area nearly derelict. Because of this, excellent streetfront retail/office property is available for affordable prices on Main Street and nearby. Such a property would provide an ideal location for a digital literacy center; it would be well served by public transportation and easily reached by many of the city's poorer citizens, who also live in the central district. The new cachet of downtown living that is fueling recent development in the area could also attract younger professionals, who might both use the services and volunteer at the center. Furthermore, the Main Street area is within a few blocks of both major universities, as well as the main public library, which could be a valuable ally.

If the project runs successfully downtown, my plan includes establishing satellite centers in the outlying parts of the city, possibly situated in some of Lexington's numerous shopping centers and other retail real estate. Lexington serves as a major retail center for large rural areas that surround the city, and many residents of nearby small towns travel to Lexington to shop. If the satellite centers are convenient to the retail areas, they could provide services and outreach to residents of Fayette County outside Lexington and other surrounding counties, as well as Lexington residents who live in the outer areas of town.

The digital literacy center would provide two main areas of service for Lexington residents: providing hardware and access, and providing education and information. Providing online

access via public computers would be one obvious service the center could offer. The center could also work to connect donations of hardware from the technical companies in Lexington with citizens in need, either individually or by helping provide them to community centers, schools, and other public places. Similarly, digital center personnel could solicit and coordinate donations of broadband access. However, I would go further and propose a program modeled on the Zero Dollar Laptop Project. In this project, currently running in London, tutors conduct workshops to teach attendees (usually low-income or homeless people) how to refurbish recycled laptops from donated hardware and install free software on it. The intention of the project is to provide knowledge and skills that directly respond to local and personal needs, and to empower users by making them more independent and happy, and "amplifying opportunity." With input from participants, the program would directly address local user-defined needs, as well as providing knowledge and skills that could translate into job market viability, especially if combined with a corporate-partnered internship program that leverages this knowledge. Source hardware should be readily available by donations from individuals and businesses that frequently upgrade and want to responsibly dispose of used equipment. Tax deductions could provide a business incentive, and donations by individuals could be motivated by offering credit toward services at the center.

The second main function of the digital literacy center would be to offer education and information to help users gain confidence and motivation to become regular users of ICT. I envision the center offering traditional classes on technological topics (for a sliding-scale fee structure), but the focus of this function area should be on bottom-up troubleshooting and responsiveness to community needs, rather than a top-down instructional curriculum. The center would constantly solicit input from the community about skills people want to learn and blocking issues they may have about using technology. The center's mission would also include constantly seeking ways to proactively create context and raise awareness about how ICT can improve residents' lives. The class listings should include some classes about common needs that many people may not think about, such as how to create a digital identity and why having one is important to such pursuits as job-seeking, and how to proceed with caution and adequate security online. However, they should also include spots for community-requested classes, which are proposed and voted on by users of the center. I imagine, for example, a system that uses a public bulletin board where users can suggest and sign up for classes that interest them: when a class reaches a threshold level of signups, it is scheduled to run. Other possibilities may include basic technical literacy broken down by age groups (for elders or children, for example); using media production software and websites; or using specific local websites (such as government and commercial websites) to pay bills or perform civic tasks like license renewal.

If some public agencies do not provide online services, the center might consider consulting with them to help enable them to do so. The center would also provide walk-in technical assistance comparable to the "genius bar" model, so that people can come into the center to ask questions and get help with their own laptops or with performing a task online, for example. Focused one-on-one tutoring may be available as well, also on a sliding-scale fee structure. Finally, the center would provide focused help and support to educators who can further spread information and skills; these might be teachers, facilitators at community centers, homeschoolers, and so on.

Hiring the right personnel to develop and run the digital literacy center and its programs would be central to its success. A portion of the budget should be allocated to salaries for a core group of paid positions, including a general director, an educational and outreach director, a director of development (a key position for an organization that will focus on repurposing donations), a volunteer/personnel coordinator, a manager of the laptop recycling program, and administrative personnel. The high-tech professionals in the community and at the universities should be an excellent resource, both for paid personnel and volunteer staff for teaching, networking, and other functions. The center could also partner with academic departments to offer internships and class credit for work.

Given the rough outlines of this proposal, the $10 million budget can only be allocated in broad strokes. Salaries for the described personnel, if defined in line with Lexington's current pay scales and national averages, should come to roughly $500,000 per year. Current real estate listings for commercial space in Lexington comparable to the offices and meeting rooms required by this proposal suggest that adequate space could be leased for a range of costs. One building currently listed offers an ideal location, with one floor of offices and meeting rooms, plus a ground floor of mixed commercial space and restaurant space that could be set up (by an independent local business) as an Internet café, providing a community space for informal networking and information exchange, an attractor for users seeking access and social interaction, and a potential income stream for the center. This building would lease for $968,000 per year. These two expenditures add up to just under $1.5 million per year; adding in other costs for promotion, equipment and supplies, and other overhead and operating costs, the $10 million grant should fund the center for at least three years, and provide further funds for a phase of expansion to the proposed satellite locations or other future programs if the project is successful at that time.